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Phonetic contrasts and miscommunication in Northern Ireland English

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This study is work in progress on Northern Ireland English. The aim of the paper is to give a brief overview of phonological and phonetic features of English spoken in the province of Ulster, a region with a rather complex situation on account of its geography and history, as well as its demography and linguistic variety. In the first place, I propose to investigate the phonemic system and its varieties in the different counties of Ulster, then I will briefly tackle the suprasegmental system, in particular intonation variations, and finally I will give a rapid description of my corpus and the acoustic analysis I have undertaken.

1. Background and definitions

To start with, it should be made clear that when one speaks of Northern Ireland English, one refers to the variety of English spoken in the northern part of the whole island of Ireland, the ancient province of Ulster. Three of its nine counties (Cavan, Donegal and Monaghan) are part of the Republic of Ireland while the six remaining counties (Antrim, Armagh, Down, Fermanagh, Londonderry (Derry), and Tyrone) form the country that is known as Northern Ireland and is part of the UK.

The variety of English spoken in Ulster is largely influenced by the immigration history of the region. Official plantations of Scots settlers were undertaken in Ulster in 1609, which brought a great number of Scots-speaking colonists from south-west Scotland and some from the north and west Midlands. Ulster English is made up of contributions from 17th-century English, Scots and Irish Gaelic (Adams 1965). In the province of Ulster two major varieties of English are to be distinguished. The first is called *Ulster English*, spoken by immigrants deriving from originally English settlers from the North of England. This is the equivalent of *Mid-Ulster English* and

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of *Ulster Anglo-Irish* (Harris 1984, Milroy 1981). The second major variety is *Ulster Scots*, stemming from 17th-century Scottish immigrants (Adams 1964, Hickey 2005); see figure 1 below. As for the south of Ulster the situation is rather complicated owing to the overlapping of language borders. South Ulster is characterised by two distinct features, *South Ulster English* and *South Hiberno-English*, South Ulster English consisting of transitional varieties between the north and south of Ireland. Hiberno-English (or more commonly now Irish English) is spoken in some northern regions of the Republic of Ireland. Figure 2, below, roughly outlines the counties where each language variety is spoken: *Ulster Scots* is spoken in most of County Antrim, North Down, North Derry and North-West Donegal. *Mid-Ulster English* is spoken in south Derry, Tyrone, the north of Fermanagh, of Monaghan and of Armagh, South and central of Down. *South Ulster English* is spoken in South-West Fermanagh, South of Monaghan and Armagh (Hickey, 1999: 21).

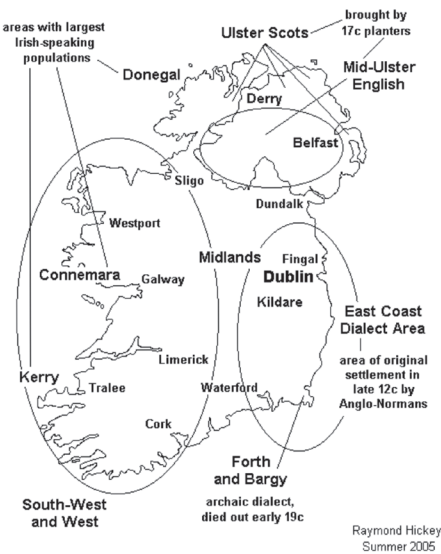


Figure 1. Ulster Scots and Mid-Ulster English (Hickey 2005: 21)



Figure 2. The major dialect zones of Northern Ireland. (Hickey 1999: 5)

The three major dialect zones of Northern Ireland, *Ulster English*, *Ulster Scots* and *South Ulster English* (henceforth, UE, US, SUE) identified by Hickey (1999: 21) on figure 2, have been traditionally distinguished on the basis of phonological and phonetic criteria, particularly *vowel quantity* and *vowel quality*. Before presenting details about distinctive Northern Ireland vowel features, here is a brief definition from the *Oxford Companion to the English Language*, of *vowel quantity* and *vowel quality*.

Vowel quantity: “a term in phonetics and poetics for the *length* of a vowel, usually indicated in phonetic transcription by a length mark or a colon [:] after a vowel, as in /aː/. Vowels so marked have in general *greater duration* than the same vowels with no such mark. Vowels so marked are described as long and unmarked vowels as short, a distinction known as vowel length.”

Vowel quality: “a term in phonetics for the property that makes one vowel sound different from another: for example, /iː/ as in *sheep* from /ɪ/ as in *ship*. The quality of a vowel is determined by the position of the tongue, lips, and lower jaw, and the resulting size and shape of the mouth and pharynx.”

2. Vowel quantity and quality in Northern Ireland English (NIE)

As mentioned above, *vowel quantity* or length is an important distinctive feature of Northern Ireland English. For instance, SUE – unlike US – maintains the phonemic vowel length system of *West Germanic*. Thus as Corrigan explains, SUE has two sets of stressed vowel phonemes, one long in duration and one short. On the contrary US has inherited the “disrupted” system of *vowel length* brought to Northern Ireland (NI) from the Lowland regions of Scotland. This new system was considered as an innovation to the West Germanic system where the duration of a vowel depends on the quality of the following sound:

This new system entailed that the length of a vowel was not intrinsic but was determined by the phonetic characteristics of the segment that followed it. There are a number of factors that predict vowel quality and since the phenomenon affects all contemporary Scots-influenced dialects it is therefore generally known either as the Scottish Vowel Length Rule (SVLR) or Aitken’s Law in honour of the linguist who first highlighted this difference between the West Germanic-type vowel length and the innovative Scots system (Corrigan, 2010: 17).

The West Germanic system and Scottish Vowel Length Rule can both be applied to MUE. However, this depends on the area where the speakers live (either near the US or the SUE area), as the MUE area is situated between the two dialect zones. My description of NIE vowel and consonant systems will be based on Wells’s (1982, vol. 2) clear-cut “lexical sets”, an internationally recognised system of vowel comparison alongside certain key consonantal features of NIE/US (see tables 1 and

2). Wells’s use of “lexical sets” aims to establish patterns of regional variation in the phonologies of English dialects globally; this system has come to be considered as a standard model. The system consists of a collection of headwords/keywords that would potentially discriminate between varieties of English without the need of the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) (See Corrigan 2010: 30).

KIT	DRESS	TRAP	LOT	STRUT	FOOT	BATH
CLOTH	NURSE	FLEECE	FACE	PALM	THOUGHT	GOAT
GOOSE	PRICE	CHOICE	MOUTH	NEAR	SQUARE	START
NORTH	FORCE	CURE	happY	lettER	horsES	commA

Table 1: Vocalic keywords and sentence/reading passage (Wells 1982)

Think	breaTHE	louGH	waTer	TRap	geT	feeL	soRE	Which	Cab
-------	---------	-------	-------	------	-----	------	------	-------	-----

Table 2: Consonantal keywords. Adapted from Wells (1982), Hickey (2004c, 2007a) and sentence / reading passage task. Taken from Corrigan (2010: 30)

2.1 Vowel quantity in NIE

Phonemes in NIE are determined either by the SVLR as in US, or by the West Germanic system as in SUE. MUE incorporates a mixed system that has a modified SVLR pattern (Corrigan 2010). Table 3 gives a clear illustration of phonemic vowel length in each zone.

Long		Short
US	/i/ sea, breeze, fear, Fiat	keen, seed, grass, geese, feet, feel
	/e/ day, daze, rain, fade, face, fate	
	/ɛ/ Des, pen, dead, mess, pet	
MUE	/i/ sea, breeze, fear, Fiat	keen, seed, grass, geese, feet, feel
	/e/ day, daze, rain, fade	face, fate
	/ɛ/ Des, pen, dead, mess	pet
SUE	/i/ sea, breeze, keen, seed, geese, feet, fear, Fiat	
	/e/ day, daze, rain, fade, face, fate	
	/ɛ/	Des, pen, dead, mess, pet

Table 3: Vowel quantity in NIE: US/MUE/SUE
(Taken from Harris, 1985: 43 and McCafferty, 2007: 125)

The three vowels /i e ɛ/ of the keywords: DRESS, FACE, and FLEECE (table 1), can be long or short according to the adjacent consonants. Vowels in final position in monosyllables are always long (e.g. *day, sea*). /i/ is long in SVLR contexts, whereas /ɛ, e/ are long in US and MUE in all environments. /ɛ/ is short in SUE and US, while /i/ can be long or short in US and MUE as the /i/ vowel undergoes SVLR; this is not the

case in SUE. Generally all vowels are short before voiceless plosives /p, t, k/. *Lack of vowel length* can be considered as the major characteristic of NIE, especially in Ulster Scots, e.g. [mu:n] for *moon* /mu:n/ (Hickey 1999).

Hickey (1999) also provides other features of Ulster vowels apart from lack of vowel length: the development of [ʊ] as in *tool* [tʊl], which is a shared feature with forms of Scottish English and Ulster Irish. The lowering of short front vowels /i/ to /ɛ/ as in *stick* [stɛk] as well as the in-gliding mid vowels which are seen in pronunciations like *save* [sɛəv], *toes* [toəz]. For instance a Belfast vernacular pronunciation of a sentence like “...he has to listen to it and find out, or work it out for himself...” will be [hi hɑːz tɪ lɪsn tɪl ɪt ən(d) fɛɪnd ɛʊt | ɔr wɔːrk (wɔːrk) ɪt ɛʊt fɔr (h)ɪmsɛlf] compared to the RP production [hi: hæz tu: lɪsn tə ɪt æ(ə)d faɪnd aʊt | ɔ(r) wɜ:k ɪt aʊt fɔ: (r) hɪmsɛlf].

2.2 Vowel quality in NIE

Vowel quality in NIE/US is generally attributed to language contact and immigration phenomena. Wells (1982) also provides a list of the monophthongs and diphthongs in NIE/US as they relate to the keywords in table 1.

KIT	/ɪ/	FLEECE	/i/	NEAR	/ɪr/
DRESS	/ɛ/	FACE	/e/	SQUARE	/ɛr/
TRAP	/a/	PALM	/a/	START	/ar/
LOT	/ɒ, ɔ/	THOUGHT	/ɔ/	NORTH	/ɔr/
STRUT	/ʌ/	GOAT	/o/	FORCE	/or/
FOOT	/u/	GOOSE	/u/	CURE	/ur/
BATH	/a/	PRICE	/ai/	happy	/e, ɪ/
CLOTH	/ɔ/	CHOICE	/ɔi/	letter	/ə ɾ/
NURSE	/ʌɾ/	MOUTH	/au/	comma	/ə/

Table 4: List of monophthongs and diphthongs in NIE/US
(Wells, 1982: 438)

This rather generalised system and the vowel quality do not apply to the three varieties of NIE (US, MUE, SUE) in the same way. Realisation generally depends on linguistic context and social backgrounds. The comparison of vowel quality between RP /ɪ, u, o, au/ and the three varieties of NIE is shown in table 5. In RP the KIT vowel has a wider lip rounding and a lower realisation whereas NIE realisation varies between [i] – [ɛ] and [ä] depending on the context and the social class of the speaker. The lower realisation, for instance, often occurs prior to both /l/ and velar consonants and it has been associated with Belfast/(London)Derry working class as well as conservative US varieties (Wells, 1982: 441, McCafferty, 1999: 248, Corrigan, 2010: 36). The most remarkable feature in NIE, however, is the realisation of diphthongs. Their number is reduced to three instead of eight in RP.

	US	MUE	SUE
KIT	[ä]	[ɛ̃]	[i]
FOOT	[i]	[ʌ - ʊ]	[ʊ]
GOAT	[o:] (e.g. <i>foal</i>) [e:] (e.g. <i>home</i>) [ɔ:] (e.g. <i>snow</i>)	[o]	[o:]
MOUTH	[ʊ]	[ə ʊ]	[əʊ]

Table 5. Vowel quality of RP / ɪ, u, o, au/ in US/MUE/SUE (Corrigan 2010: 34)

For the GOAT vowel, for instance, and unlike RP [gəʊt], US, MUE and SUE share a monophthongal pronunciation with some lexical variance in US. As table 5 shows, NIE has a limited number of diphthongs, only three (closing diphthongs ending in i and u) compared to the eight in RP. The MOUTH diphthong is obviously the most distinctive accentual feature of NIE. Its pronunciation could vary between (ʊ, əʊ or even ʌʊ) in some social contexts (McCafferty, 1999: 249). The glide from the first to the second vowel in McCafferty’s study showed more rounding in (London) Derry than in Belfast. Vowel quality analysis has also revealed relevant information about the degree of fronting of the first element and its realisation by the different social classes. Thus working class speakers prefer a more fronted [ɛ̃] segment while their middle class peers favour [a, ʌ, ɔ] realisation especially before /r/ (Milroy 1981, Wells 1982).

3. NIE/US consonants

3.1 Characteristic features

The consonantal system in Northern Ireland represents a number of characteristic features. The phenomenon of initial [h] deletion is not found in any regional or social dialect of NIE/US. /t/ is often used instead of /θ/ in initial and medial positions in words like (think nothing), while intervocalic /ð/ before /r/ tends to be variably lost as in *mother*, *brother*, *gather*, increasing with the degree of informality of speech. (Harris 1984: 131, Hickey 1999: 11). ‘Tapping’ of alveolar plosives: inter-vocally a realisation of /t/ as a tap [ɾ] is to be found, e.g. *pity* [pɛɾi]. Another feature, common to all the varieties of NIE, is the rhotic /r/ which is realised as an alveolar approximant in initial position e.g. *room* [ɾʊm]. Wells (1982: 446) identifies rolled/trilled [r, ɾ] in contexts like *strut* as typically rural. Realisation of “clear” [ɪ] was thought to predominate everywhere irrespective of context but McCafferty (2007: 126) reports on research that correlates increased usage of “dark” [ɪ̞] in formal styles amongst Belfast Catholics, while Protestants favour “clear” [ɪ] in these contexts.

3.2 Recessive features

Three features of NIE consonants are considered as recessive by Hickey (1999: 12):

1) Palatalisation of velar plosives. While this feature is commonly understood as stereotypical of an Ulster accent, e.g. *cap* [kjæp], *gap* [gjæp], it is not something emulated by urbanites and can be compared to features such as /u/ in Dublin English of which speakers are conscious but which is not part of the fashionable speech of the younger generation. 2) Retention of syllable-final /x/. This is a feature of Ulster Scots (inherited from the original Scots input) and is found in conservative forms of this variety, e.g. *enough* [ə 'nʌx]. 3) Differential realisation of diphthongs. There is a difference in quality between the realisation of /ai/ before voiceless and voiced consonants respectively. In a word like *pipe* /pɛip/ the starting point is higher and the length of the diphthong shorter than in *five* /faiv/.

4. Prosody: intonational variation

One of the most important aspects of prosody is intonation. The speaker's message and implicit intention is conveyed through intonation. Faulty intonation can contribute to misunderstanding, and "miscommunication" (see Moritz 1995, Grabe 2004), particularly in foreign language learning situations and even among native speakers:

Intonation has been described as the most difficult aspect of a foreign language to acquire and is held responsible for numerous instances of miscommunication between native and non-native speakers. In English, these are said to involve primarily the pragmatic impact of utterances and occasions when the 'wrong' intonation causes a difference in grammatical meaning or utterance type. (Grabe 2004: 1).

Intonation is a prominent feature of English in Ulster. Wells (1982: 447) states that intonation in NIE is "strikingly" different from RP and from the South of Ireland. In NIE intonation is a rising one, not only in interrogative statements but in utterances which are assertive statements or commands. The rising tone is actually the normal neutral one, with falling tones being largely reserved for echo questions, exclamation or before rises: falls only go down to the middle of the pitch range without low end. Rises routinely used in declaratives and commands are mostly represented by an abrupt steep rise followed by high plateau and not gradual rise as

in most other accents of English, (Grabe *et al.* 2000, Cruttenden 1995, Harris 1984, Hickey 2004c, McCafferty 2007, Wells 1982, Corrigan 2010).

Lowry's research on prosodic features and gender study (Lowry 2002) explores and finds support for the hypothesis that males in Belfast employ more rising nuclear patterns in declaratives than females. As nuclear falling intonation is perceived as more polite and emotionally engaged and committed (Corrigan, 2010: 49), this could suggest suprasegmental inter and intra-speaker variations.

In a comparative study of four varieties (Cambridge, Leeds, Newcastle and Belfast) of British English, Grabe *et al.* (2000) showed that *rise-plateaux intonation* dominates in declaratives as well as in inversion questions. The only difference between the two types of utterances involves the production of *rise-plateau-falls*. Belfast speakers produce them in declaratives but not in inversion questions. The investigations of *truncation* and *compression* (typological parameters in intonation) showed that speakers from NIE (Belfast in particular) truncate, that is to say, they complete less of the intonation pattern instead of increasing the rate of f_0^1 change from the longest to the shortest word (compression) as it is used in Cambridge and Newcastle.

5. Acoustic analysis in progress

Relevant written and audio materials to the understanding of language and dialects in Northern Ireland are now available. This enabled me to have access to various data for my analysis which will be mainly based on acoustic analysis. As I mentioned before, this is the first stage of 'work in progress' but my objective is to give an account of acoustic details concerning vowel length and intonation variation in different contexts: "read sentences", "read texts", "spontaneous speech", "map tasks" and discussions on a given subject.²

My study is based on three types of data: a short corpus of read sentences (six young speakers from the county of Derry, four females and two males), the IViE corpus (Intonational variation in English) and the SPICE-Ireland (NI) corpus. The IViE system was developed for the transcription of prosodic variation in different dialects of English. The system allows for the transcription of three types of variation:

- 1) cross-dialectal differences in the phonological structure,
- 2) differences in the phonetic implementation of the phonological structure, and
- 3) differences in the location of stressed and accented syllables (Grabe 2004).

The ICE-Ireland (NI) will allow us to examine the interactional and pragmatic strategies used by NIE speakers of different ages and social status. PRAAT software will be used for acoustic analyses will allow us to examine values of formants (F1 and F2) as well as the duration of the targeted vowel. F1 and F2 values provide valuable

¹ Voice fundamental frequency in Hz.

² Based on tasks suggested in the IViE corpus (Grabe 2000).

information on the position of the tongue, protrusion of the lips, and the aperture (lower jaw). Results will be compared with RP values. Intonation analyses are based on f_0 values and the shape of pitch movements surrounding the prominent syllables (we will focus on nuclear accent). H and L symbols (Cruttenden 1997) are associated with rising and falling intonations and intonation phrase boundaries.

Provisional conclusion

I hope to have provided a brief overview of the phonemic and intonational system of Northern Ireland English. Firstly I showed that there are broad differences between Ulster Scots, Mid Ulster English and South Ulster English. From a quantitative point of view, the vowel system shows noticeable variation in *vowel length*. *Lack of vowel length*, except in Ulster Scots – which is strongly influenced by Scottish English – is a prominent feature of Ulster English. The comparative qualitative description between NIE and RP points out the limited number of diphthongs in NIE and the pre-eminence of a monophthongal system.

Other features which lead to confusion and misunderstanding are, for instance, the distinction between /ɛ, ɪ, ʌ/ before /r/ which is generally neutralised and not always very like the sounds represented by the phonemic symbols. The vowel /ɪ/ as in *bid*, *bit*, is often centralised and pronounced as [ɨ] or [ɛ̞] (tongue retracted from front position). There is also a tendency to merge vowels /ɔ/ and /o/ in a vowel near /o/. Pairs like *tar/tower* are usually merged, in casual vernacular speech, into a vowel near [ɑ] (Milroy 1981).

Regarding prosodic aspects, the IViE acoustic features of declaratives, wh-, and yes/no questions, demonstrated that declaratives in NIE show rising intonation followed by a high plateau. This prosodic feature is considered as one of the most significant characteristics of NIE prosody. As is known worldwide, declaratives have falling intonation in most languages in general and in standard varieties of English in particular. Finally, the suggestion put forward by Ladd (1996) that truncation and compression may be typological parameters in intonation, showed that speakers in Belfast truncate falling accents.

Findings such as these showed that it is necessary to have different types of speech so that comparisons may be made, as well as a reliable methodology, in order to be able to come up with significant results.

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1564

Kuttolsheim, July 2009.

In 1564 Calvin died
but Shakespeare was born
and Tintoretto cheated in a competition,
painting his picture complete
before the judges could decide
which project should have won.

Synchronicity implies no connection
but helps me remember:

Shakespeare was only fifty-two
when, of causes unknown,
he died, so small a compass
for such a great account. Across the divide
and from this distant point of view
we try to decipher
how he wrote and marvel at the man,
or what he captured in so short a span,
all his minds' metamorphoses
and that inevitability of words
which once devised admits no variation.

Like phosphorescent dust
he slips through our fingers
leaving his light behind.

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